

Variability of languages in time and space

Language universals

Magda Ševčíková

December 4, 2024

- Linguistic typology and language universals
- The Greenbergian approach
- *The Rara & Universals Archive*
- Borrowing of verbs

- Linguistic typology and language universals
- The Greenbergian approach
- *The Rara & Universals Archive*
- Borrowing of verbs

- linguistic typology aims at discovering language universals
 - language universals as features that all languages have, or statements that hold for all languages, or *less strictly* (more commonly), features or statements that hold for a majority of languages

Hockett (1963:1)

“... we do not want to invent language universals but to discover them. How to discover them is not so obvious.”

- language universals *or* universals of language *or* linguistic universals
 - Joseph H. Greenberg: language universals / universals of language
 - comparison of languages
 - Noam Chomsky: linguistic universals
 - search in an individual speaker

Chomsky (1980:48)

“I have not hesitated to propose a general principle of linguistic structure on the basis of observation of a single language. The inference is legitimate, on the assumption that humans are not specifically adapted to learn one rather than another human language. . . . Assuming that the genetically determined language faculty is a common human possession, we may conclude that a principle of language is universal if we are led to postulate it as a “precondition” for the acquisition of a single language.”

- language faculty is inborn – Universal Grammar
- innate nature of linguistic universals
- an in-depth understanding of one language is sufficient

Language universals – the Greenbergian approach

Greenberg (1963:255)

“Language universals are by their very nature summary statements about characteristics or tendencies shared by all human speakers. As such they constitute the most general laws of a science of linguistics (as contrasted with a method and a set of specific descriptive results). Further, since language is at once both an aspect of individual behaviour and an aspect of human culture, its universals provide both the major point of contact with underlying psychological principles (psycholinguistics) and the major source of implications for human culture in general (ethnolinguistics).”

- language related to culture
- search for similar features in specifically designed language samples
- comparison of languages

- Linguistic typology and language universals
- The Greenbergian approach
- *The Rara & Universals Archive*
- Borrowing of verbs

- types of universals:
 - phonological vs morphological vs syntactic (etc.) universals
 - according to the language level the universal refers to
 - absolute vs statistical universals
 - presence vs non-presence of a universal in languages
 - implicational vs unconditional universals
 - if conditioned by another property, or not
- samples of languages from different language families and regions, containing tens of languages
 - Greenberg's 1963 word order universals based on a 30-language sample: <https://babel.ucsc.edu/~hank/114/greenberg.pdf>

Absolute vs statistical universals

- absolute universals
 - without exception, e.g. all languages have vowels, every language has at least two vowels, for all languages the number of phonemes is not fewer than 10 or more than 70

Greenberg (1976:9)

“for a statement about language to be considered fully general it is sufficient that it has as its logical scope the set of all languages”

- statistical universals
 - for any language, a feature is more probable than some other; e.g. a language with gender distinction in the 2nd person sg also has its distinction in the 3rd person sg but not vice versa (but languages in central Nigeria with the distinction in the 2nd person, but not in the 3rd)

Greenberg (1963)

“If a language has a particular characteristic ϕ , it has a significantly greater probability of possessing some other characteristic ψ than if it does not possess ϕ .”

Implicational vs unconditional universals

- implicational universals
 - one-way relationship between two characteristics, e.g. if a language has dual, it also has a category of plural but not necessarily vice versa

Greenberg (1963:259)

"If a language has a certain characteristic, (ϕ), it also has some other particular characteristic, (ψ), but not vice versa. That is, the presence of the second characteristics (ψ) does not imply the presence of the first one (ϕ)."

- unconditional universals
 - the existence of a feature is not conditioned by another characteristic, e.g. all languages have vowels, for all languages the number of phonemes is not fewer than 10 or more than 70

Typology of universals – an overview

	absolute (no exceptions)	statistical (tendencies)
unconditional (not restricted)	all languages have property X	most languages have property X
implicational (restricted)	if a language has property X, it also has property Y	if a language has property X, it will tend to have property Y

- Linguistic typology and language universals
- The Greenbergian approach
- *The Rara & Universals Archive*
- Borrowing of verbs

- a project by Frans Plank & Elena Filomonova et al., Konstanz Uni
- on the Internet since 1999

<https://typo.uni-konstanz.de/rara/category/universals-archive/>

- rara (pl. of *rarum* == rarity)
 - the opposite to universals: a feature found in a few members of a single language family or Sprachbund
- universals in individual language domains (overlapping)
 - phonology, morphology, inflection, syntax, semantics, lexicon, etc.

Universals in the *Rara & Universals Archive*: absolute & unconditional

- Universal 499 (syntax & ?absolute & unconditional):
In conditional statements, the conditional clause precedes the conclusion as the normal order in all languages.
- Universal 515 (inflection & absolute & unconditional):
All languages have pronominal categories involving at least three persons and two numbers.
- Universal 1320 (lexicon & absolute & unconditional):
Among the deictic elements of every human language is one that denotes the speaker and one that denotes the addressee.
- Universal 1496 (lexicon & absolute & unconditional):
The upper limb, 'arm' (and 'hand') is named by a distinct term in all languages.

Universals in the *Rara & Universals Archive*: absolute & implicational

- Universal 116 (inflection & absolute & implication):
IF there is the category of case, THEN there is also the category of number.
- Universal 430 (inflection & absolute & implication):
IF there is a singular-plural distinction in the 2nd and/or the 3rd person of personal pronouns, THEN there is a singular-plural distinction in the 1st person.
- Universal 1181 (lexicon & absolute & implication):
IF there is a separate term for 'foot', THEN there is also one for 'hand'.
- Universal 1939 (word-formation & absolute & implication):
IF words of whatever word class can be derived from nouns, THEN nouns can be derived from words/stems other than nouns.
- Universal 120 (infl+syntax & absolute & no genuine impl., rather provided that):
IF NP-internal constituents agree in more than two categories (the maximum being four), THEN those will always include number and gender and very likely also case.
- Universal 278 (infl & ?absolute & no genuine implication, rather provided that):
IF one of the forms of the imperative coincides with a pure (non-inflected, zero-marked) root, THEN its meanings include that of 2nd person singular.

Universals in the *Rara & Universals Archive*: statistical & unconditional

- Universal 701 (word-formation & statistical & unconditional):
The base number tends to be put before the unit, and in general a higher number before a lower, when they are conjoined.

Universals in the *Rara & Universals Archive*: statistical & implicational

- Universal 388 (inflection & statistical & mutual implication):
IF there is no inflectional gender, THEN morphology is agglutinative, and vice versa.
- Universal 1431 (inflection & statistical & implication):
The more developed a case system is, the less is its system of verbal tenses.
- Universal 1435 (inflection & statistical & mutual implication):
IF there is no aspect differentiation, THEN there are continuous tenses.

- rara (pl. of *rarum* == rarity)
 - a feature found in a few members of a single language family or Sprachbund
 - *rarissimum* as the extreme case
- examples:
 - Rarissimum 78:
expression of numerical approximation ('about 5', 'about the fifth') by inversion of word order from Numeral+Noun to N+Num
 - Russian and other East Slavic langs
 - Rarissimum 122:
a definite article formally distinct from (one form or another of) any kind of pronoun – demonstrative, personal (free, clitic, or bound), possessive, relative, interrogative
 - Modern English

Evans & Levinson (2009:431):

“The crucial fact for understanding the place of language in human cognition is their diversity.”

- skepticism to the existence of language universals
- information about 10 % languages out of 7k+
- average language death-rate: one language every two weeks
- most generalizations based on 500 languages
- sign languages not considered

- Linguistic typology and language universals
- The Greenbergian approach
- *The Rara & Universals Archive*
- Borrowing of verbs

- verbs are underrepresented among borrowings as compared to nouns
 - Whitney (1881):
in individual languages, borrowings not evenly distributed across POS categories
 - Meillet (1921):
in French, conjugation of verbs is more complicated than nominal declension, which is why nouns are borrowed to French more easily than verbs
 - ...
 - Moravcsik (1975):
borrowed words do not occur as verbs in the target language, they have to adopt native markers to be used as verbs

Words are not borrowed as verbs

Moravcsik (1975:4):

... the class of borrowed constituents in a language does not include lexically homolingual constituents that are verbs in both languages – constituents, that is, that share both meaning and phonetic form with (or are similar in both meaning and phonetic form to) a verb in the source language and which are themselves characterized by the grammar of the borrowing language as verbal constituents whose subconstituents are all foreign.

The more specific positive claim to be advanced is that borrowed verbs, by internal syntactic composition, are (at least) bimorphemic and that they are bilingual, consisting of a generic verb constituent whose form is indigenous, and of a more specific nominal constituent whose phonetic form corresponds, by identity or similarity, to the phonetic form of the source verb.

- examples:
 - French *déporter* → German *deportieren*
 - English *start* → Czech *startovat*
 - English *lose* → Enga *lúsa lengé* (*lengé*= to utter)

Constraints on borrowing of verbs as a universal of language contact

Moravcsik in *Universals of Human Language* (ed. by J. H. Greenberg, Vol. 1, 1978):

A lexical item whose meaning is verbal can never be included in the set of borrowed properties. This statement excludes a language that has borrowed the symbolic association of a verbal form and a verbal meaning.

- understood as claiming that verbs cannot be borrowed at all
 - Campbell (1993): the universal is “clearly false, though it may be aimed in the right direction”
- rather: verbs cannot be borrowed directly as verbs
 - Wohlgemuth (2009) decomposed the claim into two statements:
 1. Verbs cannot be borrowed as verbs but are borrowed as nouns.
 2. Loan verbs must therefore be adapted (re-verbalized) in the recipient language.

- 4 strategies for integrating foreign lexemes into the category of verbs (Wichmann & Wohlgemuth 2008 – 70 language pairs, Wohlgemuth 2009 – 400 langs.):
 - ① light verb strategy:
 - the borrowed verb used as the nominal part of a light-verb construction in the target language
 - English borrowings in Hungarian
 - ② indirect insertion:
 - an affix required to accommodate non-native verbs
 - Slavic languages (-ova-), German, Danish, Dutch (cognate suffixes)
 - ③ direct insertion:
 - foreign verbs put directly into the grammar of the borrowing language
 - French borrowings in English
 - ④ paradigm transfer (paradigm insertion):
 - the verb borrowed along with the verbal morphology of the source language and does not (not fully) adopt the target morphology
 - Turkish verbs in Agia Varvara Romani

- there is a correlation between borrowing of verbs and the morphological type of the language (Tadmor 2009:63):
 - the more isolating the recipient language, the less morphosyntactic adaptation needed for borrowing verbs as verbs
 - the more synthetic the language, the more adaptation required
- >>> verbs are much easier borrowed into isolating languages than to synthetic languages

References

- Chomsky, N. (1980): On cognitive structures and their development: A reply to Piaget. In *Language and learning: The debate between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky*. Harvard University Press, 35–52.
- Croft, W. (1990): *Typology and Language Universals*. CUP.
- Evans, N. & Levinson, S. C. (2009): The myth of language universals: Language diversity and its importance for cognitive science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32:429–448.
- Greenberg, J. H. (1976): *Language universals with special reference to feature hierarchies*. Mouton.
- Greenberg, J. H. (ed.; 1963): *Universals of Language*. MIT Press.
- Greenberg, J. H. et al. (ed.; 1978): *Universals of Human Language*. 4 vols. Stanford University Press.
- Haspelmath, M. et al. (2001): *Language Typology and Language Universals*. Mouton.
- Hockett, C. F. (1963): The problem of universals in language. In Greenberg (ed.; 1963), 1–29.
- Körtvélyessy, L. (2017): *Essentials of Language Typology*. UPJŠ.
- Millet, Y. (1958): *Les postverbaux en tchèque*. Institute d'études slaves.
- Moravcsik, E. (1975): Borrowed verbs. *Wiener Linguistische Gazette* 8:3–30.
- Moravcsik, E. (1978): Language contact. In Greenberg et al. (eds.; 1978), Vol. 1, 93–122.
- Tadmor, U. (2009): Loanwords in the world's languages: Findings and results. In *Loanwords in the World's Languages*. De Gruyter, 55–75.
- Whitney, W. D. (1881): On Mixture in Language. *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 12:5–26.
- Wichmann, S. & Wohlgemuth, J. (2008): Loan verbs in a typological perspective. In *Aspects of Language Contact*. De Gruyter, 89–121.
- Wohlgemuth, J. (2009): *A Typology of Verbal Borrowings*. De Gruyter.